Buff's back with today's B-List, and in it, he talks about just how truly great Josh Beckett has been as a post-season pitcher. How great you ask? In his last seven playoff appearances, he has thrown 3 shutouts, struck out 59 batters, walked 7, sports a belief-defying 1.04 ERA, and is 5-1. Buff also hits on the struggles of C.C. Sabathia and Travis Hafner, both of whom are just killing the Indians in the playoffs.

FINAL SCORE				
Red Sox (2-3)	1	0	1	0
Indians (3-2)	1	0	0	0

W: Beckett (3-0) L: Sabathia (1-2)

Next time the Red Sox Ace is on the mound, I think we should have his mother sing the National Anthem. Hell, let HIM do it.

1) A change in format

With few exceptions, the first List Item is about the performance of Cleveland's starter, and rare is the List Item in general that talks at any length exclusively about an opponent's player, but this needs to be one of those doubly-exceptional times, for one simple reason:

Josh Beckett is Great.

I want you to think about that term for a moment. I'm certainly not above using hyperbole: the real-time emotion of a fan often comes in extreme terms that exaggerate a player's performance or magnify the depth of his incompetence. Terms like "tremendous" and "terrific" and "fungal" get bandied about often enough to dampen their impact: fan-based spotswriting tends to lean on the Yosemite Sam Method of speaking LOUDLY and carrying a BIGGER stick. It was the greatest ever! It was the worst I've ever seen! I ripped out my eyebrows with double-sided tape and stuck them to my refrigerator! I am Sam Kinnison! Aaah! Aaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Calm down. Take a breath. Think carefully. Find a rational place.

Josh Beckett is Great.

Look, he's not the best pitcher I've ever seen, or the best pitcher who ever lived, or Don Larsen or Bob Gibson or Pedro Martinez at his prime. He's very talented, has excellent stuff, and appears to show more composure on the mound than nine-tenths of all pitchers. No, this isn't necessarily an invitation to compare Josh Beckett to anyone else in any other situation. But what I'm trying to get across is that in Josh Beckett's last seven playoff appearances, he has thrown 3 shutouts, struck out 59 batters, walked 7, sports a belief-defying 1.04 ERA, and is 5-1. Frankly, I can't tell you which game he lost. I'm not sure I can conceive of him losing a playoff game. His two-run six-inning performance in Game One was clearly the WORST start he's had in three game in the 2007 playoffs, by a SIGNIFICANT MARGIN.

I guess what I'm struggling to get across is that Beckett might not just be the best big-game pitcher of his generation (which seems indisputible), but he might be the best big-game pitcher of the Wild Card Era. Who approaches him? Schilling, arguably, if you draw the line after 2004 (which I think would be a fair thing to do if

talking about a career stretch: he's old and worn at this point, and no one uses Willie Mays' Mets tenure when discussing whether he was the best center fielder). Pedro Martinez of the '90s. Mariano Rivera deserves a mention, even in an entirely different role. Comparing across decades is a tricky thing, even if just back into the last one.

After 2000, though, name me one pitcher who has had multiple post-season starts and has looked so consistently and thoroughly excellent. I can't think of one. I might be blanking out. And there are plenty of pitchers who don't GET seven post-season starts in which to prove themselves. I mean, would Johan Santana win a World Series game? I bet he would. But that's not Beckett's fault. They hand Beckett the ball, he throws the ball, he wins the game, and (here's the part I'm flailing around) he looks ***historically great*** doing it. Historically. Great. He is That Good.

His stats are almost irrelevant: 8 IP, 5 H, 1 R, 1 BB, 11 K. One of the hits was for extra bases, and it was a double that may have travelled 130 feet. One batter hit a ball that forced an outfielder to move back (and he caught the ball). After a shaky first in which he gave up 3 hits, including the double, and including a double play that limited the damage, Beckett pitched seven more innings and gave up 2 more singles. He threw nothing but curveballs to Jhonny Peralta to strike him out. He threw nothing but corner-hugging 96-mph heat to Asdrubal Cabrera to strike him out on three pitches with runners on first and third in a 2-1 game. The runner on third was only there because Julio Lugo's brain is very small. He made Ryan Garko look preposterous striking out on a curveball, like Garko had never seen a pitch that bent. He struck out every Cleveland Indian at least once except Victor Martinez and Kenny Lofton.

I have seen better individual performances: Pedro's six innings of no-hit ball, Jack Morris' 10-inning win, but Josh Beckett has thrown three games in this post-season, and two of them have been SUPERB, the other merely very good. This is a pitcher you tell your children about. Consider my hat removed.

2) This having been said

Josh, a goatee goes ON your chin, not UNDER it. Have you been attending the Drew Gooden School for Hair Management? Come on, son. You're from Texas. Don't look ridiculous on purpose.

3) How to bowl 135

I'm a pretty good bowler. In fact, when I was younger, I would have considered my average today (190) to be tremendous and unattainable. That was before I had a properly-drilled ball made of a decent substance, but hey.

Now, my colleague is an excellent bowler. She has been to some thing called "Nationals" and is just plain better than I am. The key to bowling is really repeatability: if you throw the same ball in the same place with the same spin at the same speed, chances are you're going to get a pretty darned similar result. The thing is, life is not a video game, and repeatability is actually hard. Yeah, you can get three in a row, but can you have EXACTLY the same delivery seventy-five times in eight games (what you'd need to approach professional quality)? No. Because it's hard.

Even as a good bowler, though, it's not like I only throw 190s. I've gotten some 230s. I got a 279 once. And if you have a careful understanding of the term "average," you might correctly infer that I've thrown my share of clunkers. To bowl a 190, you have to string a couple strikes together, pick up most of your spares, and get good counts on your first ball. Not a big deal, but it doesn't take a big disaster to end up on the 130s. One frame, you foul on the first ball after a spare, costing yourself some pins. Then you hit a patch of oil, end up with a washout, and can't pick it up for an open frame. You overcompensate and plow through for a split. You miss a ten pin. It doesn't take a whole lot to end up with a pretty crummy game: each thing taken individually isn't that big a deal, but collectively, they end up costing you 50, 60 pins. (Fortunately, they still sell beer

in most bowling alleys.)

Against Beckett, C.C. Sabathia's start was almost irrelevant as well. And, unlike most recent outings, there was nothing you could really call a true Inning of Crap™. Kevin Youkilis hit a bomb in the first (if you want to teach your four-year-old what "sitting on a pitch" means, or why a pitcher who throws 95+ isn't guaranteed success, show him the video), but it was only one run and Sabathia got lucky that Franklin Gutierrez has a good arm and that Manny Ramirez runs the bases like a demented water buffalo. Sabathia got unfortunate that the home plate umpire allowed David Ortiz to walk on Strike Three, then scored on a ball hit to the wall we'll address later in more detail. And through 6 innings, Sabathia had thrown 106 pitches, giving up only two runs and striking out 6, albeit scattering 8 hits, walking two, hitting two, and uncorking a wild pitch along the way. But look: one bad pitch, one bad call, one borderline defensive play, and Sabathia's down 2-1.

Now, the two balls hit in the seventh were SMOKED. And Sabathia was charged for two mor runs in that frame, runs he deserved, although it MADE NO SENSE for him to be out there. (More on this later, too.) But really, a pitch here, a play there, Sabathia has a darned good start. As it was, he DIDN'T make the pitch and DIDN'T get the call and DIDN'T get the D and ended up with, well, more like a 150, I guess. Since Beckett was busy posting a six-bagger, it didn't really matter much.

Sabathia's post-season ERA is now one-point-six million.

4) Ho Hum Dept.

Raffy Betancourt entered the game, threw 9 strikes in 11 pitches, and retired the three men he faced, striking out one of them. His inability to hold the Red Sox to negative six runs did end up costing Cleveland the game, though.

5) Round on both ends, high in the middle

O-HI-O. Get it? O ... HI ... O? Nyuck yuck yuck yuck!

Okay, that's part of the famous Elmer Fudd/Bugs Bunny vaudeville act, which I think describes the post-Betancourt relief pitching of the Indians: ostensibly-talented performers doing things that aren't really funny that you end up groaning at instead. Otherwise, I'd be forced to explain fielding butchery, bunt singles, bases-loaded walks, run-scoring wild pitches, and Tom Mastny's hat.

6) I am Pronk, hear me whimper!

(yipe, yipe, yipe, yipe)

The last time I saw someone look as pointless and overmatched at the plate, he was Mike Rouse. The last time I saw it from a Cleveland hitter in a playoff game was ... Bartolo Colon? Jim Poole? Slider?

Great googly moogly! Hafner has now struck out 6 times in his last 8 plate appearances, and striking out a seventh time would have been preferable to hitting into the double play he bounced into in the first inning. Granted, three Ks were against Wakefield's Whacky Wiffler, and Josh Beckett is pretty darned good, but ... hellooooooooo, Travis! Playoffs have started! Time for the rectal craniectomy! Let's go, homes!

7) Nice hose!

Franklin Gutierrez charged a single by Mike Lowell with Manny Ramirez on second and threw a bullet to a location no more than thirty feet up the third base line. Fortunately, Manny was having trouble with his third pair of pants and his batting helmet and was possibly playing the cymbals with his knees like a one-man band and was so out he laughed when Victor tagged him. In Manny's defense, I laughed, too.

This is as good a place as any to repeat what reader Patrick May pointed out: while Jhonny Peralta's head has a seasonal pumpkin-like appearance, Gutierrez' retains the shape of the box in which it was shipped.

8) Adventures in umpiring

I think FOX should abandon the strike zone graphic. It's not a bad graphic *per se* (although it is impossible to understand why there are TWO boxes: ESPN's at least says, "Here is the strike zone."

What does FOX's mean? "Here is Bruce Froemming's strike zone, and here is Eric Gregg's strike zone?"), but the home plate umpires in the post-season have rendered this graphic completely moot. There is no reason to continue to advertise the fact that home plate umpires pay absolutely no attention to the placement of the baseball when deciding whether a pitch is a strike or a ball. One player walked on Strike Five. Another fell behind in the count as Balls One and Two put him in an 0-2 hole. Umpire Gary Cederstrom was the best I've watched, which is like having the best teeth in a British homeless shelter.

Meanwhile, Manny Ramirez hit a ball deep to right center with David Ortiz on first base in the third inning. The ball was so deep than Ortiz scored on the play. Manny made it all the way to first. Now, this is a little brainless of Ramirez to not run out the drive, just in case it stayed in the park, but ... um ... it didn't stay in the park. It was a homer. That's a bad call.

9) In the interest of fair play

Grady Sizemore not only hustled out a double on his blooper in the first, but looked like he might try for three (since both the third baseman and shortstop had run after the ball; Beckett covered third, so it was smart not to continue). He also got a second hit, making him the only Indian to do so.

Casey Blake had a solid single and now is tied with Victor Martinez for the highest series batting average (.316).

Franklin Gutierrez did not impale himself with his bat handle. (He didn't get a hit, either, and is batting .133 for the series.)

10) Managerial Head-Scratchers

Why was Sabathia pitching the 7th? Consider the last inning of each starter's performance in this series:

Game One: Sabathia struggling, enters 5th, walk-single-walk-single, removed
Game Two: Carmona struggling, enters 5th, allows single, is removed
Game Three: Westbrook 7th, gave up his two runs, but this is defensible and not interesting
Game Four: Byrd doing well, sits through 35-minute inning, homer, homer, removed
Game Five: Sabathia struggling, at 106 pitches, enters 7th, double, triple, removed

Now, it's a cheap statement to say the pitchers were removed after giving up hits: shoot, that's WHY you remove pitchers in general. But in at least three of those instances, the struggle was thoroughly predictable, and was apparently anticipated in that three of these men

were relieved after facing two or fewer batters (so someone was obviously ready). Why not start the inning with a fresh reliever? Four of the five guys DIDN'T RECORD AN OUT (Sabathia got one in Game One on a basepath out) in their final inning. Doesn't this seem like unnecessary luck-pushing?

11) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro will be appearing in the Broadway production of "Xanadu". I don't believe that Mark Shaprio can even roller skate, and this statement is quite false. Fire Eric Wedge.